

CHAPTER 8

A MENU PLANNER
FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS

Marketing Your Product



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Marketing Your Product

You've worked hard to plan quality meals and YOU know they are the best in town — for nutritional value as well as taste. How can you be sure your customers get that message? Bottom line: You need to *market* your product.

In this chapter, we'll focus on building an effective marketing plan. We'll explore ways to use promotions and merchandising to get students' attention. We'll also look at ways to reach out to teachers, parents, school administrators, and the community. It's important to get everyone involved — starting with your staff!

Your marketing plan is an investment in the future success of your food service operation. Even more important, it's an investment in children's health. By increasing customer participation and sales, you're increasing the number of times a student eats a nourishing meal.

You face stiff competition, especially from fast-food franchises who are masters at attracting customers. But you *can* influence whether a student eats in your cafeteria or somewhere else. Start with quality meals and quality service, combine these with good marketing and effective promotions, and you've got a recipe for success!



QUALITY PLUS MERCHANDISING = SUCCESS

Merchandising is the way you encourage students to buy the healthy meals you offer for breakfast and lunch. How you present food and menus is extremely important—so is how your employees present themselves and treat customers.

Having a clean, well-lighted serving line and staff in attractive uniforms signals to customers that yours is a *quality* program. Have you ever seen a fast-food franchise with poor lighting?

You must constantly deliver a message to everyone that your meals look good, taste good, and are the best bargain in town.



Building An Effective Marketing Strategy

How can you build an effective marketing strategy? Several steps are listed below. All are important, but you don't necessarily have to carry them out in the order given. In fact, many you will do simultaneously! This is just an overview — read on for more details and suggestions.

■ **Commit to having a marketing plan.**

Then look for ways to get your staff involved. Your employees' interest and enthusiasm is crucial.

■ **Empower staff to achieve quality service.**

How your staff prepares, showcases, and serves foods to customers is critical to the success of your marketing efforts. Encourage employees to consider how food looks as well as tastes.

■ **Be customer-oriented.**

Be sure employees greet customers with a smile. Learn students' names. Wear name tags so that students can greet your staff by their names, too.

■ **Target your customers.**

Make an effort to better understand your customers. Find out what students like and dislike, and what gets their attention. As you know, your competition makes great efforts to do this! For starters, you might set up a student advisory group.



■ **Spread the word that school meals are a SMART choice.**

Help students *understand* that what they eat affects their health in important ways. Market school meals as the healthy choice, and seek opportunities to get this message across in every way you can.

■ **Make the most of your menus.**

They are a direct line of communication with parents as well as students. Cultivate the natural link between the classroom and lunchroom through activities such as nutrition quizzes and games on the back of menus.

■ **Use promotions creatively.**

Promotions are an important part of an effective marketing strategy. They can be single events or a series of events, and they can accomplish a variety of goals.

For example, you might plan a promotion to: generate excitement about your program or a particular menu; increase parents' awareness of the nutritional value of school meals; and encourage students to choose a variety of foods.

■ **Get the whole school involved.**

Offering healthy school meals is a valuable service to your community. Give everyone the chance to become involved. Seek ideas from students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. Generate excitement by inviting parents and members of the community to attend special meals and other activities.



Getting Started

You've decided to pay more attention to marketing. Start by looking around and asking yourself questions like these:

■ **Can we brighten up the cafeteria and make it more fun?**

- How can we decorate? Will students, teachers, or parents be willing to help?
- What are the school colors? Can they be used in the cafeteria?
- What is the school mascot? Can the mascot's name be part of the cafeteria's name?

■ **Are we doing a good job displaying food?**

- What is the first thing a student sees in the serving area?
- How does the food look from the customer's point of view?
- How about garnishes? Do they complement the flavor, color, and texture of the foods?

■ **Are we doing a good job serving food?**

- Does the staff serving the food know how to place it on the plate or tray so it will look attractive?
- Are employees using the correct serving size and proper serving utensil for each food item?
- Are pre-portioned food items being served in appropriate quantities for the grade groups being served?



Making the Most of Your Menus

Menus are important. Your customers read these every day. In fact, students often decide to purchase lunch based solely on the day's menu or the promotions announced with it.

Menus also communicate information about the program to parents, teachers, and school administrators. Because menus list selling prices of lunches and a la carte items, this is your best opportunity to show that the complete lunch is the best buy. Here are some tips:

- ***Jazz up your menu writing.*** For example, use lively language to describe menu items. For “hamburger” say: “Build Your Own Superburger.” List “Chicken Chow Mein” or “Beef Stir-Fry” but don’t stop there — call the day’s lunch a “Far East Feast.”
- ***Send menus home with students.*** Include your phone number and let parents know they can approach you.
- ***Put activities on the back of menus.*** And reward teachers and students for completing the activities.
- ***Tell why school meals are a healthy choice.*** Use menus to tell students and parents about the nutritional value of the meals you’re offering.

GO AHEAD — BRAG!

Including nutrition facts on menus is a good way to let parents and students know about the nutrition goals you’re working to meet. For example, tell them you’re following the advice outlined in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. You may find that many parents are already familiar with and interested in these Guidelines. They’ll be pleased you are, too.

For a special promotion, print a menu that gives more detailed information about a particular nutrient or nutrients. You will find some interesting facts on key nutrients, such as food sources and contribution to good health, in Chapter 4 and Appendix 9.

Planning Successful Promotions

A promotion is an event or a series of events designed to accomplish a specific goal or goals. Promotions can be big or small, short or long, and can reach many different audiences. It's best to begin by identifying *what you want to achieve* and *who you want to reach* with this particular promotion.

For parents, for example, you might plan a short promotion for Back-to-School Night — perhaps an attractive display with a brochure on why school meals are a smart choice. To interest students, you might plan a series of festive meals, complete with costumes for your staff or classroom tasting parties.

A promotion provides an excellent opportunity to introduce new menu items. But don't overdo it — show only one new food item at a time. A total of two or three in a month is plenty! To make sure students notice:

- Make the new food item sound appealing on the printed menu.
- Offer an incentive — a reward for choosing the new food.
- Display a poster that lists the food's nutritive value.
- Introduce new foods in the classroom or plan small portions when first offering a new food.

Your efforts to get students' attention need to be ongoing. Don't skip a month because there is a lot going on. Your customers will come to expect the promotions and be disappointed if there are none.



Planning a Promotion?

THINK ABOUT THE “BIG” PICTURE!

There are lots of ways you can plan successful promotions. Use your imagination and the worksheet on page 210 to get started. Remember to think about the “big” picture — what students are interested in and what else is happening at school.

- **Select an objective and target group.** Decide what you want your marketing campaign to accomplish and who you want to reach.
- **Determine a timeframe.** Will you do a promotion for a day, a week, or an entire month?
- **Check the school’s calendar.** You might want to plan promotions to coincide with or support other campus events, such as sports activities, dances, or plays. Or perhaps you want your promotion to be the week’s big splash. Seasonal changes and holidays can offer opportunities for fun themes.
- **Select a title.** The title needs to get your customers’ attention! “Five a Day, Give Me Five,” “Pyramid Power,” and “A World of New Tastes” are a few examples.
- **Plan for publicity.** You need to plan in advance how you are going to get the word out. Publicity is critical to a successful promotion. But you don’t need to do all the work. Local publicity resources can help, if you initiate the contact and develop working relationships.
- **Work with student and parent advisory groups.** You may already be working with an advisory group, but if not, consider setting one up for your special promotion and other activities, too.
- **Have displays at special events and meetings.** Announce your promotion by having a display table and brochures available during activities such as health fairs, Back-to-School Night, kindergarten orientation, and parent-teacher association meetings.

A PROMOTION PLANNING WORKSHEET

1. **Objective:**

Activity:
Food Items:

2. **Target Group:** (Circle one or more)

Students Parents Teachers Administrators

3. **Date(s):**

Coincides with campus events? Holidays?

4. **Theme and Title:**

5. **Publicity:**

(a) Print:
(b) Media:
(c) Other:

6. **Dress/Decorations/Merchandising Tools:**

7. **Incentives/Prizes:**

8. **Who Is Responsible?**

9. **Costs/Expenses:**

10. **Evaluation:**

Complete after your promotion by circling the appropriate numbers below.

	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Satisfactory</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>
How well did this promotion accomplish our objective(s)?	1	2	3	4
If a new food item was introduced, was it well received?	1	2	3	4
How did students respond?	1	2	3	4
How did staff respond?	1	2	3	4

Want to Get Students' Attention? **TRY THESE MERCHANDISING TOOLS**

There are lots of merchandising tools you might use to get students' attention. Use them in combination for best results!

■ Displays

A variety of display equipment can work well in a school setting. Kiosks, photo boxes, and free-standing posterboards or easels are just a few. Use them to promote new menu items, advertise theme days, and spread the word that it's fun to eat at school.

You may be able to make some display equipment yourself with help from parents, teachers, and students. USDA's *A Tool Kit for Healthy School Meals: Recipes and Training Materials* (see Appendix 3) includes a set of directions school woodworking instructors can use to lead students in building a promotional kiosk.

■ Bulletin boards

Do your students have time to read when they are waiting in the serving line? Bulletin boards — especially if they're fun to look at — can spark students' interest and extend an exciting invitation to learn. Designate one bulletin board for monthly promotions and one for general nutrition. You might be surprised at how interested students are!

■ Costumes or special accessories

When you're doing a promotion, have your staff dress for success! Make an event fashionable and fun with employees wearing buttons, aprons, hats, T-shirts, or costumes. You can make your own costumes or borrow or rent them.

■ Posters and banners

Perfect for a wall or even the wide side of a salad bar, banners can help add color and excitement to your cafeteria setting. Plus, they are inexpensive to do!

■ Signs

When trying to expand your customer base, place signs outside the cafeteria and in other areas around the school campus.

■ Static-cling decorations

Use them to decorate your cafeteria, to add color, or to create a mood for a special theme day. Static-decorations are easy to do and you can save and reuse them.

■ Music and props

Music can help set the stage for theme days, but it's great for regular days, too. Play music in the cafeteria while students are eating. Use music on the intercom system to get students' attention during morning announcements. Bring music from home, get it from your local library, or check the school library for possibilities.



Want to Get Students' Attention? **USE PRIZES AND SURPRISES**

Students love prizes and surprises! Use them to increase participation, reward young children for selecting new food items, and in general to make eating at school fun. Here are some ideas:

"Reach Into the Surprise Can"

Make school lunch a special occasion with a "Surprise Can." Each student who buys a complete school lunch (instead of a la carte items) gets to reach in and take a card. The lucky winner's card would announce a small prize.

Water Bottles, Fanny Packs, Frisbees, T-Shirts

Promote healthy exercise and eating habits by giving larger prizes. Look for sources of promotional materials, such as local sports stores and athletic associations.

Frequent Customer Card

Plan a frequent customer card program. When a student's card is stamped completely, he or she receives a prize.

Lucky Sticker Day

Young children love stickers. When they try new foods, reward them with a sticker. Use stickers to add excitement to the lunchline — put stickers on some of the trays and give small prizes to the lucky students who get them.

Pencils for Learning

Plan a word game that features foods for a healthy diet and give out pencils to students who play.

Poster Contest

Challenge elementary students to have a poster contest. The winning class gets a private party in the cafeteria with tablecloths and decorations.

"Wake Up to Nutrition"

Add excitement by telling students an alarm clock or timer will go off sometime during the meal service. Whoever is at the cash register when the buzzer sounds will get a prize or free food item.

Magnets to Take Home

At the beginning of the school year, give refrigerator magnets to students for posting school menus at home. Magnets featuring your logo help students and parents remember your program throughout the school year. And, if you don't have a logo, consider developing one!

Special Visitor

Invite a celebrity, such as a professional athlete, to dine with your students or have a costumed mascot visit the cafeteria. A staff member or parent volunteer can wear the costume and give a pep talk to get students involved in and excited about what's happening in their meal programs.

"Take a Taste"

Invite students to take a taste. For example, give out food samples at the entrance to the cafeteria or at the beginning of the serving line. (For added fun, have a costumed mascot offer samples to students waiting in line.) Have classroom or lunchroom tasting parties and let the students sample new items in advance. And use that feedback!



Generating Interest

School meals ARE the best choice for taste and good health. That's the message you want to get out in every way — and as often — as you can. Here are some tips for generating interest in your program. Use them to reach students, parents, teachers, and the larger community, too. These tips may also give you ideas for publicizing a particular promotion or enticing students to learn more about eating for good health.

- **Place information in mailings or handouts to parents.**

See if you can include information in the principal's letter or perhaps in mail-outs by the parent-teacher association.

- **Reach out to student and local newspapers.**

Offer a story idea — or an actual feature — to a local newspaper or campus newsletter. High school journalism students might enjoy helping you write the article. For a byline, they might even volunteer to write it themselves.

Contact local newsletter editors or writers. Tell them you can provide information in whatever form they prefer — short items for a regular “nutrition news” column or longer pieces that can be reproduced in their entirety. A note of caution: If you're not preparing the materials yourself, be sure to check that there are no copyright restrictions on what you're offering.

Many of your promotions will create great photo opportunities. Make sure student reporters and local newspaper staff know about them. Also have a camera on hand so you can take photos, too.

- **Take advantage of word-of-mouth publicity.**

Look for opportunities to spread the word informally. For example, talk with students and teachers as they go through the line; visit the school nurse and health educators; talk with coaches.

- **Use flyers, invitations, and brochures.**

Place a brochure describing your program, hours of operation, and meal prices in a clear acrylic stand in all the school's main offices. Give brochures to school district business managers, principals, superintendents, and presidents of parent groups. Set up display tables during special events.

- **Publicize activities with signs and the school's intercom system.**

To publicize special promotions, put up signs several days in advance in places where students will be sure to see them. Follow up with announcements on the intercom several times for emphasis.





■ **Form a student nutrition advisory committee.**

A student advisory committee can help you in a variety of ways, including with menu changes. Include parents, teachers, administrators, and child nutrition staff as well. Making a committee successful can be time-consuming, but positive results will make the effort worthwhile.

Be sure to use or respond to the group's major suggestions. Also, when appropriate, be sure to involve administrators in any changes affecting serving times or procedures.

■ **Sponsor school-wide nutrition games.**

Place quiz questions in a variety of places where students and teachers might see them — for example, in teachers' mailboxes, resource and lunch rooms, and the school's main office. Give a master list of questions and answers to teachers or student leaders, who can announce the "nutrition question of the day" as an educational game.

■ **Foster classroom-lunchroom links.**

School food service professionals and teachers, especially health educators, are natural partners. Healthy meals can help students have the energy and nourishment they need to succeed in the classroom. And classroom activities can encourage children to choose foods for a healthy diet.

REACH OUT TO TEACHERS

Teachers are an important audience for your marketing plan. Ask them to help you get across the message that healthy school meals are a smart choice — for health and educational success. Give teachers information and activities they can use with their students. And be alert for opportunities to foster a classroom-lunchroom link, especially with health educators.

One activity you can easily pursue is printing nutrition activities on the back side of menus. Suggest teachers: (1) encourage students to complete the activities; (2) review the answers in class; and (3) incorporate nutrition mini-lessons.

Help teachers plan activities that are lively and fun. Encourage students to: choose a variety of foods; eat more grains, vegetables, and fruits; and be careful about getting too many calories from fat, especially saturated fat.





■ **Look for resources — near and far.**

You might be surprised to learn how many people in your community are willing to help you market healthy food choices. The produce manager of your local supermarket, for example, might help you host a classroom tasting party.

A representative from organizations like the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, or the American Dietetic Association might accept an invitation to speak to teachers, students, or parents. These organizations can often provide valuable nutrition information materials as well.

Other sources are the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), USDA's Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC), and the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA).

■ **Build on success.**

Use your imagination and ideas from your staff or the teachers at your school to make your cafeteria the "in" place to be. Form partnerships so that several people are involved and responsible for the outcome of your marketing efforts.

Put aside a set amount of your budget for marketing expenses each year. Start small and build according to your successes. Invest in marketing — the rewards to your program will be great!



